WAIS Inc

March, 1993

WAIS Inc. Question and Answers

General

1. What is WAIS Inc.'s vision for electronic publishing over networks?

We believe that distribution of digital information over networks will allow computer users to get the information they need, when they need it, wherever they are. Electronic publishing will also allow publishers to focus on the quality of their products, rather than tying up scarce resources in printing and distribution–related issues.

2. Why is electronic publishing so important to the use of networks?

WAIS Inc. believes electronic publishing means computers serving people. To achieve that definition, customers must use computers as an information delivery vehicle with access to a vast array of information sources. Electronic publishing does not mean a few, proprietary, information providers. It means access to related information wherever it might reside, and the opportunity to publish for anyone with something to say.

3. Why are you categorizing WAIS as an electronic publishing system? Why not call it an information retrieval tool, which has already been talked about by the press and analysts?

We don't feel the term "information retrieval" adequately describes the capabilities of the WAIS system. Besides having traditional retrieval functions such as Boolean and natural language searching, the WAIS system works in the world of interconnected, wide–area networks, which allows a publisher access to virtually unlimited markets for their information.

4. Why do you consider information servers to be a popular product for general computer users?

We predict that the first users will be publishers and government agencies, who are attracted by the enormous cost savings to be derived from electronic publishing. But we also see an analogous situation with PC–based personal productivity tools, which have successfully replaced other document creation methods in organizations of all kinds. WAIS servers transport those documents to where they are needed, when they are needed. This means that content creators of all types can reach their markets without distributing their work on paper, film, or other static media.

5. When can we expect to see WAIS servers from WAIS Inc?

We are now installing pre–release versions of the WAIS Server for selected customers. You can expect general product availability by the end of the year.

6. What kinds of customers are putting resources behind WAIS products and services?

While our partners don't permit us to quote exact figures, we can say that our initial customers are putting millions of dollars and substantial personnel behind WAIS projects. Some publishers are installing Internet connections specifically so their markets can have access to their WAIS databases.

WAIS Inc.

1. Why is there a WAIS Inc?

As the WAIS movement has grown, so have requests for the existence of a commercial enterprise dedicated to developing, supporting and stimulating the adoption of WAIS in all markets. Commercial markets requires fully supported, fully maintained products with consulting and training services. WAIS Inc. is addressing these requirements with enhanced products and services, while working closely with all elements of the WAIS movement to ensure compatibility and growth.

2. How does the WAIS Inc. server compare to the freeware?

WAIS Inc. is offering a product which combines what has been learned from the freeware release with the founders' expertise in the super computer world. The WAIS Inc. server was developed from scratch as a commercial product, and includes support and maintenance.

3. What specific features are new in the WAIS Inc. server?

- Improved natural language search – the ability to get good search results without learning a complex query language is enhanced by term and document scoring.

- Relevance feedback – the RF (get me more documents like this one) algorithms used in the commercial product are implementations based on statistical analysis of the database.

- Weighted Boolean – standard Boolean operators AND, OR, NOT, and ADJ have been added. In addition, the results of a Boolean operation are weighted to indicate how closely a document matches the expression.

- Mixed natural language and weighted Boolean – natural language expressions can be used as arguments for Boolean operators. For example "get me mail from john NOT about the picnic".

- Fielded search – allows the user to restrict the search terms to a sub component of the document (e.g.. author, title, etc.)

- dbmaster – a GUI interface to the creation and maintenance of WAIS databases (currently available on NeXT platforms only).

- Smaller index size – index sizes are roughly one third the size of those produced by the freeware (even though they contain more information) and are capable of scaling to larger databases.

- Logging capabilities – the server includes tools for automatically analyzing log files produced by the server. This allows the administrator to check the performance of the server, and adjust the database if necessary.

- Access lists – the administrator can control who has access to each database.

- Integration with database repositories – for specific customers, WAIS search engines have been integrated with standard data repositories.

- Database management tools – allows administrators to add, remove, monitor, and age WAIS documents.

• Migration to Z39.50-1992 – the NISO standards body is finalizing a new version of Z39.50, the protocol on which WAIS is based. This will allow interoperability with other information providers, and allow their clients to query our servers. WAIS Inc. will provide an orderly migration path to the new protocol.

4. In addition to the product, what services are available from WAIS Inc?

• Support and maintenance – WAIS Inc. customers receive timely service, training, upgrades and performance monitoring.

• Documentation – server administration issues as well as user manuals are documented and delivered to WAIS Inc. customers.

• Consulting and custom development – WAIS Inc. will work with customers to build custom clients and servers to suit the needs of their application. We also offer consulting in setting up and using the WAIS software, as well as consulting geared toward introducing networked information systems (WAIS, email, bboards, internet, etc.) into an organization.

• Strategic alliances – WAIS Inc. is at the center of a movement where pc's meet super computers, information publishers find a large new audience, and worldwide networks reach the home and remote office. WAIS Inc. is positioned to help build markets, and facilitate commercial access to the internet. In most cases, WAIS Inc. looks to team with other organizations to address market issues.

Relationships

1. How does WAIS Inc. relate to the MCNC CNIDR and USGS?

In some cases, customers are best served by freeware distribution methods, and in many cases the work of other WAIS–oriented organizations is critical to the adoption of WAIS. Also, many commercial customers are interested in locating consulting and development help that can best be served by not–for–profit organizations. WAIS Inc. is committed to supporting the work of other WAIS–oriented organizations, whether commercial or not–for–profit.

2. How does WAIS Inc. view the use of Gopher for accessing WAIS databases?

Gopher's browsing environment is an excellent complement to the WAIS search facility. Users often find that exploring new services and becoming accustomed to WAIS is enhanced by the use of Gopher and other front end services. WAIS Inc. is committed to working with Gopher and other gateways to make WAIS databases accessible to the widest possible markets.

3. As WAIS use grows, will the traffic overwhelm the Internet?

As a publishing vehicle, WAIS offers one overriding benefit: The information resides in a single place, close to the publisher, and customers use the Internet to come to it. Information is delivered only when a customer asks for it, and the customer only gets the documents that interest them. And, with a WAIS service, the publisher can restrict access to their information sources, and receives detailed usage reports.

A WAIS–based service is quite different from the NetNews mailing lists that populate the Internet. Information remains in the database until retrieved (a document at a time). This is not a "firehose" of information, but more like a drip system, where publishers are exposed to a minimum amount of drainage from their information store.

In addition, all documents sent over the Internet have been requested by a client. This efficiency makes WAIS suitable for publicly available services and restricted services, whether for pay or not. WAIS Inc. encourages publishers to establish their own relationships with their audiences, and will work closely with publishers and with the Internet community to establish effective business models for electronic publishing.

4. What is WAIS Inc.'s relationship to Thinking Machines?

Prior to establishing WAIS Inc. as an independent company, its founders worked for Thinking Machines Corporation. A close, synergistic relationship exists and Thinking Machines sells a very high end WAIS server (in use at Columbia Law Library and other sites). Beyond that, Thinking Machines has no financial stake in WAIS Inc.